

Orchards at an Exhibition

Four poems by Richard Bauckham

Charles François Daubigny, *Spring* (1857)

So Daubigny invented Spring.
 All the bright blossoming orchards
 start here.
 Daubigny, Pissarro, Monet, Van Gogh
 Not until Daubigny planted his easel
en plein air
 did anyone notice, it seems,
 nature's extravagant
 early spring fashion,
 designed though it was to show off.

But they do not entirely steal the show,
 these pre-Impressionist
 exquisite blooms (each petal painted).
 One square of the double-square canvas
 is theirs
 but the tranquil heart of this landscape
 they share
 with a girl on a weary donkey.

Really the Japanese were there first.
 They invented Spring.
 They made it a ceremony, an occasion
 to cherish the cherry blossoms'
 ephemeral
 moment, as in a haiku.
 Shigemasa, Shōkei, Hiroshige ...
 They were admired in the salons.

But Daubigny's Spring
 is a moment of rural realism,
 a scene snapped from a world
 that already was passing.
 The girl in the red headscarf stops,
 not to enjoy the blossom,
 but to give her donkey a break from the daily toil.
 It is a world we look into
 but cannot be part of.

A frail fragrance of nostalgia drifts

through all the flowering orchards
from now on.
We love them for the loveliness
that may so soon be lost.

The painting can be seen at

<http://www.charles-francois-daubigny.org/Spring,-1857-large.html>

Vincent van Gogh, *The White Orchard* (1888)

Are you hiding, Vincent,
there in your white orchard
where the beauty bursts
like a balloon in your mind?

Could we track you down,
peering for trodden grass,
as though a brushstroke
askew might betray you?

No, for everywhere you daub
your grassy presence
you have wandered,
high on this white wonder.

Have you drifted higher,
up where the palest gold
mottles the floating sky
and tree tops exceed the canvas?

My guess is that only just now
you slipped out of sight
where the furthest trunks beat
an infinite regress.

Hiding, Vincent, you have left us
these ever upward branching
trees.
Theirs are the real presences.

The painting can be seen at

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0024V1962>

or

http://www.vggallery.com/painting/p_0403.htm

Vincent van Gogh, *The Pink Peach Tree* (1888)

But here you are not hiding.
All other orchards aside
this here is you.
This tree entranced you.
This is the tree you became.

Those were your fruit salad days
heady as sunflowers
hopes hovering high
in that Provençal sky.
It was heart-stopping stuff.

How do you feel, Vincent,
when your artfullest gaze
woos this blown blossom
not to possess
but to express
its bright mystery?

In an orchard
no tree is alone.

The painting can be seen at
<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0025V1962>

Vincent van Gogh, *Orchard in Blossom* (1889)

These trees are crazy.
 Look at their angular elbows,
 how they lean into each other,
 outlined in hard purple,
 fingers grasping the soft blossom,
 waving it wildly!

Their energy is joyous.
 "We are alive!" they shout,
 "We are the future!"
 and the near dazzling grass
 hears and grows visibly,
 stridently vertical.

Hear the crazy trees cry
 in the sun soaked air!
 See the crazed trees cavort
 like cheerleaders for life!
 Feel the fervour we need,
 share the healing we crave
 for our lives,
 so demented, so dead.

The painting can be seen at

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0038V1962>

or

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van_Gogh_-_Blühender_Obstgarten3.jpeg

NOTE: This sequence of poems was inspired by the exhibition *Inspiring Impressionism: Daubigny, Monet, Van Gogh* at the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. Daubigny's *Spring* and Van Gogh's *The White Orchard* were exhibited. Van Gogh's *The Pink Peach Tree* and *Orchard in Blossom* were not at the exhibition, but seen at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.